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Wilmer's Wife

By Warwick Deeping

"In the light of the little quiet flames Wilmer saw his wife's chair. It was empty. Of course it was empty. And yet, as he closed the door and moved towards the centre of the room, he found himself questioning its emptiness.

"'Supposing she is there?'"

WILMER was sitting in front of the fire, his elbows on his knees, his fists under his chin. His slippers lay on the hearth-rug just as he had kicked them off. His pipe had gone out, but he held it gripped between his teeth.

"What a mockery!" he thought, and glanced at the empty chair beside him.

It was a very ordinary armchair, upholstered in blue tapestry, with rolled arms and a comfortably sloping back. A green cushion lay on the seat, and as Wilmer glanced at it a flicker of pain seemed to pass across his face. It had been his wife's chair, and that green cushion had formed the familiar halo behind her bronze-brown head.

He stared at the cushion.

His wife had been dead for a year. She lay in that North London cemetery, deep in the dreary clay of it, and she had died before he had become so fatuously famous.

For his fame was fatuous, since it had come to him when it had ceased to matter, when it was useless, and he had ceased to care.

Had it come a year earlier, how different things might have been!

The house-bell rang. He heard the maid go to the door, and a moment later she was looking kindly at the bent back of him, and holding out his letters.

"Letters, sir."

"Put them on the table, Mary."

"Shall I turn on the light, sir?"

"No, don't bother."

She went out, closing the door gently, with pity in her pleasant, unsubtle eyes. "Poor gentleman, he had taken it to heart," and Wilmer sat there, staring at the fire.

Presently he turned and picked up the letters. There were quite a number of them, a proof of the public's delight in one of its latest pets. Wilmer glanced perfunctorily at the envelopes, bending down before the firelight, with his thin and sensitive face lit up by the glow. What a budget! Letters from enthusiastic young ladies beseeching him for autographs. Another letter from a titled person asking him to present her with some of his books to be sold at a charity bazaar. Yet another letter from a cinematograph company, desiring to be informed whether the film rights of his next novel had been disposed of.

And a letter from his literary agents. He recognized the impressive notepaper used by Messrs. Wagstaffe & Plater.

"DEAR MR. WILMER, — Messrs. Macalpine are anxious to receive the MS. of your autumn novel.

"We have pleasure in informing you that 'Tempest' has reached a tenth large edition.

"The news from the U.S.A. is magnificent. 'Tempest' is still the best seller." Etc. etc.

Wilmer threw the letter into the fire and watched it burn. The curling, reddening sheets seemed to writhe mockingly.

A year ago he had been a poor man, so poor that he had been

unable to give his wife that last great chance that might have saved her life. For fifteen years she had given him love, courage, and understanding, she had been the human triumph behind the bitterness of his failure, she had worked and smiled in this shabby little Canonbury house, filling it with a spiritual tenderness. When he had gone down into the deeps, her love had picked him up, and with a faithful comrade's courage had set him on his feet again.

"Go on, Peter. Some day it will come to you."

And it had come, but after her death, after he had ceased to care, and that was where the damned irony of it wounded him. "Tempest," the fragment of blood and of tears that had brought him so much material plunder, had been written while death had come nearer and nearer. He had read it to her, chapter by chapter. He had finished it a month before she died. And it had gone out to the world with her name upon the page of dedication.

"To Kitty."

And Kitty did not know.

Yet how he had striven to convince himself that Catharine Wilmer did know, and that all that had happened to him since was as real to her as it was to him. Death and survival had not vexed him until he had found himself alone, and then he had struggled in the darkness outside the gate of the great mystery, trying to penetrate it, to feel Kitty's presence somewhere in the beyond.

He had failed, though there had been moments when he could have sworn that she was near him, sitting in that chair.

He could remember waking at night after she had died and imagining her near him, quietly breathing.

"Kitty!"

And then emptiness, and the realization of it, and the anguish of an inexorable silence.

II

Sitting before the fire, Wilmer told himself that there was no survival. Death was the end of things, a disaster that could not be retrieved.

A flutter of black ash recalled his agents' letter and its opening sentence:

"Messrs. Macalpine are anxious to receive the MS. of your autumn novel."

Wilmer got up and turned on the light. At the curtained window stood his desk, with papers of notes and a wad of unruled foolscap upon it, the pen laid neatly across the inkstand. During the daytime the window looked out on a little, black walled, sooty garden in which grew a scraggy lilac, one or two hollies, and a few other shrubs. For ten years he had sat at that window, writing. He had been a man of an impetuous untidiness, but now this table of his was meticulously neat, for it was a dead table where no live thought flowed.

Wilmer was unable to write. Since his wife's death his inspiration had deserted him.

His agents were asking for the autumn book, and the book did not exist.

Moreover, Wilmer did not care.

What did it matter? He glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece, stood a moment in an attitude of deep thought, and then went upstairs to his bedroom. At the top of the stairs he paused to call to the old servant.

"Mary."

A door opened.

"Did you call, sir?"

"I shall be out to dinner. Take the evening off. Go to the pictures."

"I would just as soon be at home, sir."

"No, go out," he said with a touch of irritation; "it will do you good."

A few minutes later Wilmer was in the street, walking fast, but with no definite objective before him. His body was a mere automaton.

He felt dissociated from it, this poor thing of the flesh that had to be fed and clothed and put to bed. His mood was one of strange detachment, for the ties that bound him to life had grown weak and frail, mere threads of gossamer waiting to be broken by some sudden impulse.

"Why should one live?"

He found himself in Upper Street, a shadow among shadows under the haze of a February sky. It was cold, with a dry frostiness in the air, and the lights from the street lamps and the shop windows spread a soft blurred canopy between the houses. People passed him and were passed by him; the roadway was clamorous and discordant, and yet he had a feeling that everything was unreal, and that he—the man who proposed to die—was the one and only reality. All these people were the mere shadows of his own sense impressions. Already—they were dead and did not know it. Beyond the edge of desire lay the one reality, nothingness.

Wilmer was unconscious of the passing of time, but when he returned to the familiar street he seemed to recognize something dramatic in its dullness. He leaned against a brick gate-pillar and looked at his own house, that little early Victorian box of bricks where so much and yet so little had happened. The house had a friendly and intimate look. Its eyes seemed to meet his with a stare of infinite understanding.

"Yes, come in out of the night," it said. "You and I will be together. You shall do just what you please, and I shall not utter a word."

Wilmer smiled. He crossed the road, walked up the paved path, took out his key and opened the door. A moment later he had closed it behind him, and found himself standing in the darkness of the passage hall. It was familiar, yet strange and silent, and yet—as he stood there—he felt that its silence was alive. A shiver of awe went down his spine. He listened. For a moment he held his breath.

He had a feeling that there was someone in the house, and so strong was this feeling that he challenged the house's silence.

"Mary, Mary; have you gone out?"

No one answered, but for fully a minute Wilmer stood straining his ears, his heart beating fast and hard. It was as though there was something there, something that lay just beyond the perceptive power of his senses, a presence intuitively felt. He was aware of a sense of strain and of tension, as though his self were striving to reach up and out beyond the limitations of his physical body. There was something to be touched, heard, seen, if only he could get beyond the ineffectual flesh.

"Kitty?"

A mysterious excitement seized him. He groped his way down the dark passage, arms extended, his eyes searching the darkness. A faint line of light showed under the sitting-room door. He found the handle, and pushing the door open, stood looking into the room.

Mary had made up the fire before going out, and hung the fireguard on the bars, and in the light of the little quiet flames Wilmer saw his wife's chair. It was empty. Of course it was empty. And yet, as he closed the door and moved towards the centre of the room, he found himself questioning its emptiness.

"Supposing she is there?"

He felt an inward trembling.

"There—but invisible. After all, one's senses shut one in. There may be something that can go beyond the senses."

He drew into the shadow of a corner where the bookcase stood.

"I could swear—that I felt——"

And then his hands went out appealingly.

"Kitty, if you are there, give me some sign, if such a thing is possible."

The firelight flickered and there

was silence; and swept away by some helpless impulse, Wilmer threw himself on his knees by the chair and buried his face in the green cushion. He remained quite still with a rigid stillness, but presently he raised his face, and it was the face of one who listened.

Moreover, it had an expression of wonder and of expectancy. He turned, and leaning against the chair, stared at the fire, for somewhere within himself a little distant voice seemed to be speaking.

"Peter, the holiday we never had, the holiday we always talked of. Sunlight—and the blueness of sea and sky."

His face twitched; one hand gripped the green cushion.

"Somewhere in the South. I want to see palm trees, Peter, and the mimosa——"

A spasm of emotion seized him.

"Of course. I remember. Why shouldn't she be with me in the spirit? We'll go."

III

Wilmer made all his arrangements through Messrs. Cook's office in Pall Mall.

When he entered the office about ten o'clock next morning he held the heavy swing door open for a moment as though allowing a companion to pass through. He was smiling. At the long counter a clerk glanced at him inquiringly.

"Yes, sir?"

"I want to go to Algiers. Can you arrange everything?"

"You will want a sleeper, sir, and a cabin? There is rather a rush just now. And the hotel?"

"The best there is. It must have a garden, and not be in the middle of the town."

"The Mustapha would suit you, sir; fairly quiet and beautifully situated."

"Can you wire for a room?"

"Certainly. Accommodation on the train and on the boat from Marseilles for one?"

"For two."

"A two-berthed cabin, and a sleeper for two. And the hotel? The Mustapha has suites."

"I should want a suite facing south."

"Very good, sir. You have a passport?"

"No."

"We shall have to arrange that. I take it, sir, that you wish to leave——"

"As soon as you can obtain the necessary tickets and accommodation."

"We will wire at once, sir. I will make a note of all the details."

Wilmer left by the boat train on a raw February morning. No one saw him off; in fact no one but the old servant knew that he was going; and in his pocket he carried a letter from his literary agents, an anxious and worried letter. Wilmer had written to tell Messrs. Wagstaffe & Plater that his next novel would not be ready for autumn publication, and had hinted that its completion was a matter of indifference to him. His agents had diagnosed "swelled head."

He had the expectant look of a man setting out upon a memorable adventure. At Calais his calmness in the ridiculous scuffle at the Customs might have suggested the experienced traveller.

His porter delivered him into the hands of a little swarthy man in a chocolate-coloured uniform, who conducted Wilmer to his sleeper.

"For two, monsieur?"

"Yes."

Wilmer closed the door, and arranged his baggage, and he behaved as though someone were sitting on the seat by the window.

"Not a bad crossing, Kitty. You would like the lower berth, dear. I shall be able to tuck you up before climbing upstairs."

Later, the attendant, a man of commerce, realized that Wilmer had no travelling companion.

"But monsieur is alone?"

"No."

The man stared.

"There is a gentleman who has no berth. If monsieur is agreeable——"

Wilmer was not agreeable. He showed a touch of fierceness. He had paid for his compartment and he did not wish to be disturbed, and the attendant, pocketing a fifty-franc note, left him alone.

At Marseilles the sun shone, and Wilmer, the sole occupant of a two-berthed cabin, stood on the deck of the *Timgad* and watched the golden figure of Notre Dame de Mont Gard grow dim against the blue of the northern sky. The sea was calm, and the deck-steward was portioning out deck chairs. Wilmer asked him to reserve two.

"What name, monsieur?"

"Wilmer."

"*Monsieur et madame?*"

"If you please."

So the red chair next to Wilmer bore on its little white card "Madame Wilmer," as he sat and watched the sea.

A florid, sanguine, talkative old lady occupied the chair beyond the vacant one. She and Wilmer went in to meals and returned to their two chairs, and in due course the sociable person attacked the dreaming man. She had a book in her lap, Wilmer's novel, "Tempest."

"Beautiful crossing."

"Perfect."

"I am afraid your wife must be rather a bad sailor."

Wilmer started.

"Yes."

"What a pity! The cabins are so stuffy. I always believe in staying on deck."

Before Algiers flashed its whiteness across the blue, the sociable lady had discovered that she had made the acquaintance of the great novelist, and she showed that she was impressed, but she was a good deal puzzled by seeing Wilmer disembarking with no travel-weary wife leaning upon his arm. And she was still more puzzled when she found herself sitting opposite to him in the omnibus of the Mustapha Hotel.

The bus swept them out of Algiers up to Mustapha Supérieur, while Wilmer sat and dreamed, and the sociable lady exercised a tactful reticence. It was obvious to her that Wilmer was an unusual man, and he behaved in an unusual manner, for when the omnibus deposited them in the hotel courtyard, Wilmer got out and wandered aside into the garden. He strolled along the terrace, with the late sunlight splashing upon the palms, olives and cypresses, and the flowers aglow in the green alleyways, and the red earthy spaces. He carried his hat in his hand. He was looking for a mimosa tree, and when he found one he stood and smiled at some imagined person who stood close beside him.

"Mimosa, Kitty. This is the sort of place we always dreamed of."

At the reception bureau a polite under-manager greeted him smilingly.

"Ah, Mr. Wilmer, we thought that you might have missed the boat. Yes, your suite is ready. Perhaps you would like to see it."

The under-manager led the way to the lift, and paused as though he expected a third person. His eyes met Wilmer's.

"Are you alone, sir?"

Wilmer replied with a movement of the head, and the under-manager bowed him into the lift.

"Pardon, but I understood—the suite is reserved for two."

"If I approve of it—you can charge me for two."

"It is a little unusual, sir."

"Does it matter? I like space."

Wilmer approved of the suite. It consisted of a spacious bedroom, a bathroom, and a small sitting-room, and its windows looked out over the garden and into the fragrant yellow heart of a mimosa tree.

Wilmer ordered tea, and he drank it at one of the open windows, watching the changing lights upon the garden below him.

"Good, isn't it, dear? Just what we dreamed of."

Meanwhile Mrs. Gallaby, the lady of the *Timgad*, was chattering over her tea to a party of friends whom she had come to join.

"Who do you think came over in the boat with me? Yes, and he is staying here—Mr. Wilmer, who wrote "Tempest." And oh, my dear, there was something most odd."

"These literary people!"

"No, he looks quite ordinary. But he had two chairs on deck labelled Monsieur et Madame Wilmer. His wife's chair was empty, and so—of course I thought—we had been chatting—you know—I thought she was a bad sailor or an invalid——"

Mrs. Gallaby had a sense of the dramatic; she refilled her tea-cup.

"And wasn't she?"

"My dear, there wasn't a Mrs. Wilmer."

"Oh!"

"He got off the boat alone, and he came up in the bus with me—alone. Now—why——"

"Did you mention his wife?"

"I asked him if she was a bad sailor."

"Well?"

"And he said yes. Wasn't it odd?"

When Wilmer walked into the dining-room he was quite unaware of the fact that a dozen people were watching him with interest. The head-waiter bustled up to him.

"A table for one, monsieur?"

"For two, please."

The man was polite but puzzled. He led the way to a corner.

"Madame is dining in her room, monsieur?"

Wilmer produced something from the side pocket of his dinner-jacket, and that something was transferred to the head-waiter's hand.

"I wish to have a table for two. Someone will be joining me here—very soon."

"Very good, monsieur. Shall we lay two covers?"

"Please."

The head-waiter pocketed two hundred-franc notes, and Mrs. Gallaby, who had been sufficiently near to hear the conversation, touched her neighbour's sleeve.

"Did you hear? He asked for a table for two. Isn't it odd?"

As the days went by the Mustapha Hotel found itself becoming more and more interested in Wilmer's oddness. He spoke to no one, though his reserve was not studied and wilful; he ignored his fellow humans because he had ceased to be aware of them. He idled about, or sat in the sun, and on his face was a look of gentle expectancy. Unsubtle people thought him "sidey," and reduced his aloofness to a question of "pose." He spent much of his time in wandering about the hills, steeping himself and his growing obsession in the African spring, breathing the colour and the smell of it. Kitty had been a great lover of flowers, and all the flowers that he saw were hers.

He became a source of interest to the staff. They liked him, for he was generous and courteous. The *femme de chambre* and the valet who looked after him thought him pleasantly and romantically mad. "Some great trouble!" For on his dressing-table he kept a silver mirror and hair-brush, a tortoiseshell comb, a box of hairpins, scent bottles, women's things. A lace bed-cap hung on the mirror frame, and a pair of grey suède shoes and pink satin slippers waited under a chair.

"And he has a lady's night-dress in a silk case on the pillow beside him. Poor fellow!"

"How ridiculous!"

"Why should it be ridiculous? I always dust the shoes and the slippers, and clean the silver, and put it just as he placed it."

"And he tips well."

"You say he is an author?"

"He keeps a portfolio on the table. It is full of clean paper. I have seen him sitting there, but he never writes anything. Sometimes,

I open the portfolio and look inside."

"Touched in the head."

"I have no quarrel with such queerness. I wish some of the old ladies had a little of it."

There was one person in the hotel who had begun to observe Wilmer with the eyes of a clinician, and that person was the English doctor, a man with a quiet blue eye and an air of laconic kindness. Wilmer interested him. The doctor watched him for some days with a keen and sympathetic curiosity. He noticed that when Wilmer went to sit in a quiet corner of the terrace he always kept a vacant chair next to him, and that sometimes he spread a coat over the chair. The doctor followed him on one or two occasions up the hill to the Bois, and he observed that Wilmer walked on the outside of the path, and that he kept turning his head to the right. "Just as though a woman were walking beside him!"

On another occasion, Rome—the doctor—witnessed a curious incident. One of the hotel bores, a little, pursy, ape-headed profiteer with a face of brass, who was for ever talking about "my suite," went up and laid a hand on Wilmer's other chair. Curmudgeon needed this chair, and chairs were free, and Wilmer had no right to it.

The doctor saw Wilmer betray a sudden, unexpected fierceness.

"This chair's reserved."

Curmudgeon appeared inclined to challenge the assertion.

"No one's sitting in it, my dear sir."

Wilmer jerked the chair from the other man's grip, and placed it carefully on the far side of him.

"It is reserved. If you want a chair, find another."

The chair-stealer came away fuming, and appealed in a thick voice to Dr. Rome.

"Did you see that? The fellow's cracked."

"Why?"

"Stuck to that chair. I thought he was going to get up and hit me. Just as though his best girl was coming to sit in it."

"Perhaps she is," said the doctor.

"He ought not to be allowed in the hotel. Everybody's talking about him."

"Well, they must talk about something. Besides, there is nothing offensive about the man."

"Nothing offensive? Why, my dear sir, if he isn't cracked, he is the most swollen-headed idiot that ever——"

"Talked about a 'suite,'" said the doctor, who had moments of wanton puckishness.

But in Wilmer's dream world the illusion was not all that it seemed. He had moments of bitter loneliness when the dream seemed nothing but an illusion, for what proof had he of that dear, invisible presence? There were times when he was most strangely sure that his wife was near him, and though his senses were too unsubtle to detect her immaterial presence, the soul of him felt some other being near him. The look of expectancy remained in his eyes, but it was more anxious and less radiant.

"Oh, words, words!" he would say to himself; "they are as useless and as limited as our senses. Something in me feels that which can neither be defined nor explained. The blind worm is on the edge of vision."

Often in the evening he would walk up to the Bois, and standing there among the silent pines, look up at the star dust, and at the lights of Algiers below him. Like a visionary, alone in some very solitary place, he would try to penetrate the eternal mystery, to thrust himself through into a world of other dimensions.

Standing there he would speak to his dear, unseen comrade.

"Kitty, I am waiting. I want you. I feel you—there. Give me some proof, dear, for sometimes my spirit is weak."

He would try and justify the silence.

"We are so much in the dark, dear. I can understand that it may be very difficult for you to get back to me in this world—as we know it. My senses limit me. These bandages of the flesh! Is it possible for you to unroll them, and to make me see and feel, or divine the imperishable 'you'? If you could touch me but once——"

His feeling of anxiety increased. Dream as he might Wilmer knew that he could not prove to his eager, critical self that the obsession was anything but a dream. He might surround himself with his memories of her, with tender imaginings, pathetic make-believe, yet the illusion cast no shadow.

People noticed that he went about with a slight droop of the shoulders. His eyes looked anxious, and his face had lost its expression of happy expectancy. He avoided his fellow humans more and more; he ceased to appear in the dining-room and took his meals in his own suite.

Dr. Rome's interest grew more personal and grave. He began seriously to think of laying a gentle hand on this quiet madman's illusion. Something tragic might happen, for Wilmer's face suggested a possible tragedy.

IV

One day the Mustapha Hotel realized that Wilmer had disappeared.

Gossip put it about that he had gone to the desert. Someone had seen him driven off very early in a closed car, and Mrs. Gallaby, who lived on the same floor, questioned the *femme de chambre*.

"Yes, madame; Monsieur Wilmer has gone to Bou Saada. He will return in a few days."

Wilmer saw the sunset from the balcony of the little hotel at Bou Saada. Below him lay a garden with cherries and apricots in blossom and a yellow-foliaged lemon tree full of pale fruit. Bou Saada spread itself in brown cubes among the palms and against a streak of yellow sand, with here and there a solitary tower or the dome of a mosque rising above the flat-roofed houses. The mountains were camel coloured. Amid the palms and prickly pear a stream flickered. Somewhere a blackbird scolded between bursts of deep piping.

Wilmer leaned his arms on the rail. He had come over the Atlas Mountains and across the leagues of stony desert that lie beyond Aumale, and he had felt tired; but as he looked at the fruit blossom, the grey green palms, the flickering water, and the outlined strangeness of the little Eastern village, his tiredness seemed to pass. He heard the powerful voice of a muezzin calling the people to prayer. The desert flashed a momentary gold. He could catch the sound of running water, and a sense of peace descended on him.

"This is what she wished to see. Can she see it? She does see it."

There were violets in the garden below, crimson stocks, and roses. It had been raining earlier in the day, and the air felt fresh. And Wilmer lingered there, watching the light die and the palms growing black under the stars.

Someone knocked at his door.

"*Monsieur, le dîner est servi.*"

He went down and dined, though he hardly noticed what he ate or the people at the other tables, and afterwards he returned to the galleried balcony and watched the dim town and the still dimmer mountains. A great silence held. A murmur of voices came from some of the other rooms, but he was not disturbed by them. A man and a girl came and stood under one of the other arches; he heard their laughter and their soft, happy chatter, and the human part of him was glad.

"Lovers," he thought, "like we were—and are."

And his right arm hollowed itself

as though to enclose the invisible figure of his mate.

A spiritual calm descended upon him. He went to bed and slept without dreams, to be wakened just before the dawn by the muezzin's voice. It sent a tremor of awe through him, a quiver of expectation, and he slipped out of bed, and putting on his overcoat, stood on the balcony and watched the dawn.

Birds sang, the hills bathed their faces in the light, and the palms grew gently green under a cloudless sky. The strange town began to add its murmurs to the sound of running water. And Wilmer's brain seemed to grow as clear and as cloudless as the sky, and a tremor of exultation and of wonder stirred in him. The dawn, the inevitable dawn, symbol of the eternal mystery!

From the very beginning of it that day seemed to him to be unlike all other days. He dressed, and with a strange sense of lightness at the heart he went out, and ignoring the casual crowd of guides and beggars at the hotel door, made his way down to the bed of the stream. He was alone here, under the palms; but as he sat among the stones and listened to the running water he felt that he was not alone.

There he remained, with the shadows of the palms and the sunlight falling about him. The hours passed. Time had ceased to count, nor did he feel hunger or thirst, for his body was no more than the shadow of a tree or the water upon which the sunlight played. He waited, his eyes expectant, his mouth tremulous with a kind of smiling tenderness.

"One whole day thou shalt fast, and towards evening the spirit shall descend upon thee."

Where he had read these words Wilmer could not remember, but they seemed to come to him out of the clear desert sky.

About sunset he arose and stood leaning against a palm tree, his face to the west. His eyes were lit up.

"Kitty, I cannot go back unless you go back with me."

And then something came to him, a directing impulse, an inward urge, something that he found it impossible to describe. He felt impelled towards the hotel. He returned to it, walking like a somnambulist, past the chattering Arabs and a staring waiter who said something to him that Wilmer did not hear. He went up to his room, closed the door and locked it, and stood still by the end of the bed.

"What do you want me to do, Kitty?"

He seemed to listen. Then he moved to the table by the window, where he had left a notebook and pencil. He sat down, opened the notebook, picked up the pencil, and for a few seconds he remained motionless, rigid. Then the pencil began to move; it jerked, traced a few meaningless scrawls, and then, with a queer air of deliberate swiftness, it began to write.

Ten minutes later, just as the sun set, Wilmer was holding up the notebook and reading what he had written.

"I am here—Peter—with you—always. Write, write for Kitty. Go back, help mend life."

And the handwriting was not his own handwriting, but the handwriting of his wife.

V

Wilmer's chauffeur, a grizzled Italian whose smile uncovered two rows of strong white teeth, had brought Wilmer over the Atlas Mountains with irresponsible and brilliant recklessness; but before starting on the homeward journey from Bou Saada his English passenger cautioned him.

"Drive slowly, and be careful on the mountains."

The Italian beamed

"Monsieur is a little afraid of the mountains?"

Wilmer's French was not of the best, but the Italian understood him to say that there was a second passenger in the car. The chauffeur comforted him with a beneficent flash of his white teeth, and on the mountain road he drove most sympathetically, to be rewarded in the courtyard of the Mustapha Hotel with a tip of a hundred francs.

The Italian took off his hat and bowed low. Later he was heard to say that the Englishman was moon-struck but generous.

Yet, the Wilmer who had returned to the Mustapha Hotel was a different Wilmer. He walked into the dining-room that night with a happy erectness; an inward light seemed to burn in him. He bowed to Mrs. Gallaby, and joked with the head-waiter.

After dinner he sat in the lounge and smoked, and when Dr. Rome came and sat beside him, Wilmer broke into conversation. He laughed. He appeared light-hearted, but not in the least light-headed.

At nine o'clock he went up to his suite and rang for the *femme de chambre.* She found him standing by the writing-table, his portfolio open, with a photograph lying on the top of the white sheets.

"Madame, I shall have some work to do. Would it be possible for you to tidy my room at nine o'clock each morning?"

"Certainly, monsieur. Monsieur does not wish to be disturbed."

A month passed, and Wilmer had become part of the life of the hotel. He went about with a serenely radiant face; he attended concerts; he talked to the old ladies. On the terrace he still kept that empty chair beside him, and the hotel respected it. He went on botanizing expeditions with Dr. Rome.

And he was working five hours a day; and never before had he done such work, for the invisible presence was with him, filling his whole life.

One April day, a week before his return to England, Wilmer walked down through the garden to where Dr. Rome was sitting contemplating a bed of anemones. There was a vacant chair beside the doctor, and Wilmer took it.

"Rome, I want to ask you a question."

"Well, my dear man?"

"Don't you think me just a little mad?"

Rome posed for the moment, found himself meeting the mystery of a smile.

"I must say, Wilmer, that I thought you a little strange."

"Life is strange, doctor. Has anyone explained it?"

"Not yet."

"My wife died, you know; but now she is with me again. Look here; I am going to send you my next book, and I want you to write and tell me whether you think it to be the book of a madman."

VI

In the early winter Dr. Rome read Wilmer's latest book. What the critics said about "Peace Haven" does not matter, for its success was not a mere material triumph, but a capture of the great heart of the world.

Dr. Rome wrote his letter.

"My dear Wilmer,

"I think this is the most sane and human thing I have ever read."

So the years passed, and in a Surrey garden, somewhere in the deeps of a green valley, Wilmer wrote and dreamed and grew flowers. He brought peace to many sufferers. And in the evenings, when he wandered in his garden, he was not alone, for the garden was full of an invisible presence that was more real to him than the perfume of the flowers.

Warwick Deeping.

The Will of the People

By Grenville Hammerton

"'Yes, I am Eunice Valery,' said the girl slowly. 'Who are you, sir?' It seemed to be a single motion, so rapidly was it carried out. Von Stalberg covered the space with a single stride and sank on one knee before the girl, caught her loose hand and carried it to his lips.

"'I am your Majesty's humble servant,' he said simply."

"HE'S derelict," said Captain Clipstone, surveying the wallowing hull through his glasses. "Not a sign of life aboard her, Hardredge. Crew been picked up by a liner, likely enough. Just as well—we couldn't do anything for her, since we've lost our boats."

"I *hope* she's derelict," said John Hardredge. "It will be tough luck for the poor brutes aboard her to see us go by without helping her, if there are any aboard.

"There's someone living aboard her," he exclaimed. "I saw a flick of white, and it moved."

"A bit of an awning," suggested Clipstone, working away with his glasses again. "Where did ye see it, Hardredge? You've got good eyes."

"There, alongside the wheel-grating. Ah, it's moving again. It's—God help us all! It's a woman."

"Then the woman must be dead, or she wouldn't have been left behind," said the skipper of the *Tartar* sturdily. "We'd better get back to our course again."

"We don't know she's dead," said Hardredge, straining hard with his eyes. "She might be living."

"Can't be. Sailors wouldn't leave a woman behind them. It isn't in seafaring nature, man.

"Get her on her course, Hardredge." But the first mate of the *Tartar* seemed disinclined to obey for once in his life. He was known in Liverpool as a good officer, one somewhat above his position. He had private means and a strain of good blood in his constitution; many men wondered why he did not go into the Cunard or the White Star, where his talents might have a wider scope. They said he was wasted in the *Tartar;* they did not know the deep affection that existed between Clipstone and his first officer. Hardredge loved the sea, but he loved it as a foe, paradoxical as the statement sounds. He had no desire to face it from the security of a leviathan liner's bridge; he loved to get to grips with it on its own level—the man was a born fighter, never happier than when pitting his strength and intellect against the ravings of the winter storms. So he stayed on in the *Tartar*, quite content to lead a life of struggle and stress; for that he counted happiness.

"There, I saw a hand lifted," he exclaimed. "It's no use, sir, there is someone alive aboard. And if there is we've got to save them."

"We've nothing that will float," said the captain again. "We're wasting time here. Better alter the course or we'll be running her down." The sea was running high after the gale, and it seemed as if the *Tartar* might foul the derelict in no great space of time. Hardredge gazed earnestly at the huddled heap beside the wheel-grating, and his heart stirred strongly.

"It's a woman, and she's alive," he said slowly. "No, sir, it's not

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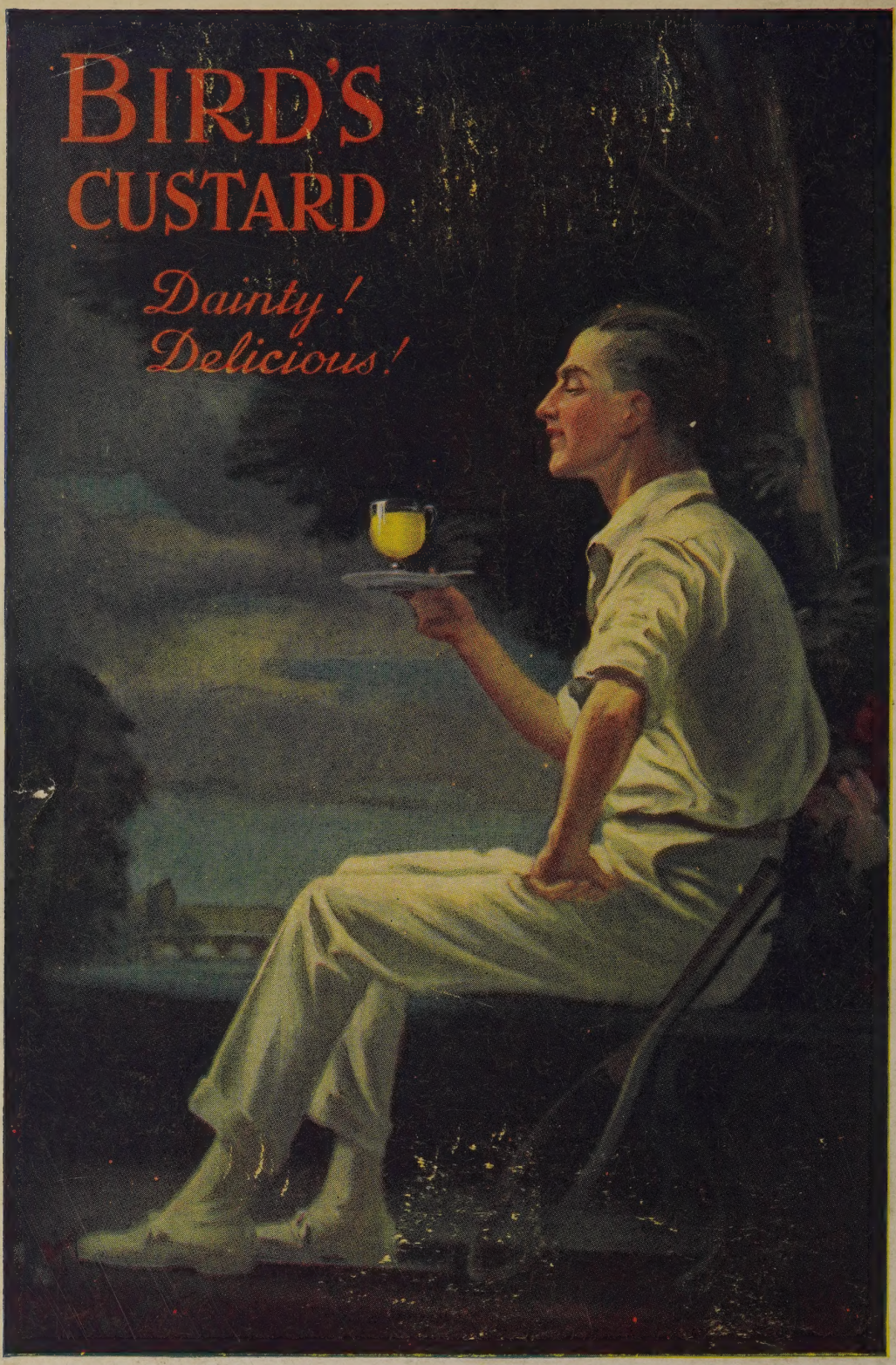

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